

Increasing Employee Creativity and Productivity in the Midst of Corporate Cutbacks

I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area at the end of 2000, right as the dot com boom started to bust. I got four job offers in one month, started working and immediately became familiar with the L word: Layoffs. For three years, I watched colleagues and friends stripped of their badges and escorted out of buildings. Sometimes they simply disappeared, quietly and unexpectedly. Like a scene from some sort of dark communist-era film.

I survived about ten rounds of layoffs and six different bosses over a three year period. As a senior marketing communications manager for a mid-sized high-tech company, I was expected to remain creative, cut costs and do more with a lot less. At a time when I felt angry at the situation and at the company I worked for. Even though I don't work inside a corporate environment anymore, I know that things are a lot worse these days. So as I watch what's occurring with corporate cutbacks today, I've asked myself what would have helped me to be more creative and productive as an employee working in a constantly changing environment. Since I'm now a creativity coach, I also have a better understanding of what transpires during layoffs and can share some suggestions designed to help corporations and their employees overcome these challenging times.

What happens during layoffs?

Our brains are designed to interpret any type of change as a threat to our very existence. When change is introduced to us, the amygdala—the part of our primordial brains responsible for the flight or fight response—kicks in and fear takes over. While fear mobilizes us for action, it slows and often shuts down capabilities that might impede our survival, such as reason and creativity.

During layoffs, companies expect their remaining employees to be more creative and think out of the box in order to get more done with less resources. But the last thing from an employee's mind is creativity. Most employees are overcome with fear of losing their jobs. Functioning in survival mode, employees can only access a very small portion of their creative potential.

Even if they're not afraid of losing their jobs, employees may feel resistance to performing creatively because they are dealing with huge changes within the organization. While I did my work very well during layoff times, I wasn't highly motivated. I felt traumatized by the way my company handled layoffs, the loss of close colleagues and the little value the company seemed to place on remaining employees. While our workloads continued to increase, our voices seemed to grow smaller.

Circumventing fear: creating a supportive environment

Some of the things I mention below may seem obvious, but they may not be obvious enough for some organizations. Providing support, creating a communicative work environment and encouraging fun and appreciation among employees are all ways to circumvent fear so that organizational creativity can flow once again.

Offer support for laid-off employees

Knowing that ex-employees receive respect and support provides relief to remaining staff members. The most frightening part of layoffs for me was watching how terminated employees were treated during and after the layoff process. Is it necessary to supervise workers while they clean out their cubicles and then escort them out of the building? This is not standard procedure across all companies of course, but whatever your policy is, make sure to think through how it will affect your remaining employees. Besides severance pay, offering some type of post-layoff support is also important. Even if your company can't afford to pay for outplacement services, providing an information package explaining where laid-off employees can find coaching, resume writing and career placement support is greatly appreciated.

Offer support for existing employees

Acknowledge that the changes remaining employees are facing are big and real and stressful. Gregory Berns, a neuroeconomist who conducted Skinner-like brain-imaging experiments to better understand decision-making, noted in his *New York Times* article "When Fear Takes Over Our Brains," that "for many people, the wait was worse than the shock." In other words, the effects of not knowing whether you're being laid off or not can be scarier than being laid off. In his experiments, "almost everyone preferred to expedite the shock rather than wait for it." To help your remaining employees through this fear, offer a list of coaching or counseling professionals they can turn to. If your company's budget allows, consider expanding your employee assistance programs to fully or partially subsidize payment of these services.

Lighten up the work environment

Fun, laughter and play encourage creativity. Create a corporate play initiative. Invest in creativity workshops for different departments. Or simply ask department heads to dedicate a few minutes in their team meetings to discuss small ways to make work more fun. How can each employee make his or her work more playful? By bringing a small toy to work, by writing in purple ink? What is it that employees love best about their work? What small action can they take to make themselves or another employee smile during the day?

Ask small, specific questions and listen to the answers

"Big goals trigger big fear," writes Dr. Robert Mauer in his book *The Kaizen Way*. According to Dr. Mauer, who is an expert in the Japanese technique of using small steps to achieve success, the way to bypass fear is to break actions down into tiny manageable actions. Employees want to take an active role in making a big impact on the company, but you don't want to overwhelm them even more by requiring them to solve large, ambiguous challenges. Instead of, "What are you going to do to make our company the industry leader?" try asking, "Can you think of a very small step you might take to improve the processes in your department?" Remember that a very small idea can result in great changes, so listen carefully to the answers employees provide.

Promote balance

Today, everywhere I turn I hear, "I don't have the time or the money for that." People are working harder than ever and are cutting out the things they love to do. In order to relieve your employees' stress levels and increase their productivity, it's important to encourage just the opposite. It sounds counterintuitive. But if they take the one hour to work out or paint or do the one thing they love to do, employees will feel more relaxed and their work will flow more easily. Eastern modalities are a great way to instill balance in your employees. Invite meditation, yoga or Qi Gong experts to teach employees simple breathing and body movements to relieve stress. Work with these types of practitioners to provide company discounts. Even circulating information on different available resources will encourage employees to engage in these types of activities on their own.

Creativity across the workplace means more to the corporate bottom line than most of us can imagine. It not only means more productivity and employee satisfaction, but streamlined operations, better products and survival in an increasingly harsh marketplace. But as Berns points out, "just when we need new ideas most, everyone is seized up in fear, trying to prevent losing what we have left." By making some simple investments in their employees, organizations can handle layoffs and post-layoffs in a new supportive way. So the L word doesn't have to instigate constant fear any more. And employees can go back to reaching for their creative potential. These are the types of measures that would have worked for me as an employee. These are the methods that still work for me and my clients today.

rita farin is a 20-year marketing professional and entrepreneur who chose to become a full-time writer, artist and certified creativity coach. She now helps individuals unleash their imaginations to create new realities and organizations foster creativity in the workplace to improve business productivity.